FOR REFERENCE ONLY
INDIANA COLLECTION
Whiting - History

1895

SCHRAGE SENTINEL

1995

A Step Back In Time

Centier Bank did not just happen. It is most interesting in reviewing the past history of Whiting to go back to the "Roots" — to the beginning — to find the heritage behind this most successful financial institution. References to places and family names are familiar.

The early settlers showed persistance and their trials and tribulations are quite evident. Where would we be without them?

Picture if you will the 'lay of the land'—

A visitor coming to Whiting about the year 1860 or in the middle of the fifties would have found transportation a serious difficulty. If the stranger came by rail, as he might have done after 1853, it was necessary to leave the train at Ainsworth, as South Chicago was then called, and walk the ties five miles to Whiting. If he came on foot or horse conveyance, he would have found a great scarcity of roads and bridges.

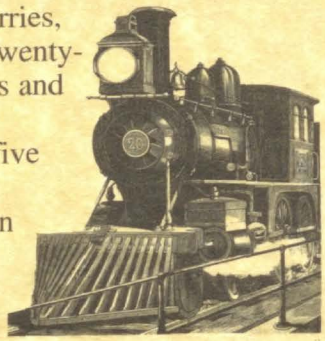
It actually was great great grandfather Christoph Schrage, originally from Hesse, Germany, who brought his family to Whiting from Chicago in 1854. They found it necessary to travel south as far as Hegewisch in order to get to Chittenden bridge over the Calumet River, as South Chicago did not have a bridge at that time. From Hegewisch they traveled on the so-called Indian Ridge to East Side, where they found a passable trail near the lake to Whiting.

A sidelight into Christoph Schrage—

A story is told about when the Lady Elgin was wrecked off the Wisconsin shore in 1860. Many bodies were carried south by the current and were strewn along the Whiting beach from the State line to Edgemore. Christoph Schrage, with an ox team, drove along the shore and gathered up the bodies. Most of these were buried in temporary graves and were afterwards taken up by friends and relatives, although some of the bodies were never claimed. A few of the victims whose corpses were washed ashore near the State line were buried on the Eggers farm.

More than 100 years later, Centier Bank received the Family Life Enhancement Award. Interesting? People helping people. History does repeat itself.

In 1854, wages of $1.00 a day were considered outstanding. Land north of 117th street sold for about $1.25 an acre. The main Indian trail did not go through Whiting so very few were seen. Hunting, fishing and a variety of berries provided a living for the settlers. Heinrich Schrage tells a story which illustrates the hardships of those days just before the war. He was accustomed to accompany his father, Christoph, in expeditions to Tolleston where huckleberries were obtained. They would walk ten miles east, following the Pennsylvania embankment to Tolleston. At that time Fort Wayne railroad had been graded but financial troubles had halted the completion of the line. After picking their berries at Tolleston it was necessary to walk to Ainsworth (South Chicago) fifteen miles, and there take the train to Chicago. There was no station stop at Whiting until later. The fare from South Chicago was fifty cents for the father and twenty-five cents for the son. It was therefore necessary, besides picking the huckleberries, to walk twenty-five miles and pay out seventy-five cents in car-fare in order to get to market.



At the age of 19 (1863), Henry joined the Army of the Civil War and participated in the battles of Chattanooga and Lookout Mountain, as well as Sherman's famous "March to the Sea." After the war he opened a store in Whiting, served as city councilman, and later was selected to serve as Whiting's first postmaster and also Road Supervisor.

The Road Supervisor had to look after a large mileage of roads between the State line and the Calumet River, but he had very little money available for the work. The greatest obstacle to road making was the water and deep muck of the sloughs. It was usually necessary to haul brush in the winter time as a foundation, because no sort of a foothold was possible in the summer season. Sometimes the muck was ten or fifteen feet deep and furnished almost insuperable difficulties. At that time every

From the Spotlight - publication of Centier Bank Second quarter 1995

voter was required to work out his poll tax on the roads. Henry showed great energy in pursuing the reluctant voters to obtain the labor which all the roads so much needed. Once he found it necessary to arrest a certain delinquent and defiant citizen who refused to work. Mr. Schrage's zeal is said to have been the moving cause of his defeat in one election as many voters felt that he was too energetic in requiring the legal work on the road. In a succeeding campaign, he was again re-elected to the office.

Henry Schrage's first store was an exceedingly modest affair when it started in 1870. The articles offered for sale filled only a few shelves and could all have been placed in a good sized cupboard. The store grew in importance and was soon the central feature of the neighborhood activities. The post office was established in 1871 with Mr. Schrage as Postmaster and in 1874 a regular station stop was established by the Lake Shore road. The building of the Baltimore and Ohio railroad in the seventies added to the importance of the settlement. This was a prosperous time in Whiting, and the Schrage venture became an active and profitable enterprise. For fifteen years this store was the center of the business, political and social life of the community. A new store was built in the eighties.

In 1886, three and one-half acres of land at New York avenue and 119th street sold for $460. Twenty-three acres of Lake Michigan beach land sold for $51. Popular names in the community were Roberts, Vater, Eggers, Horlbeck, Steiber, McCrea, Poppen, Forsyth, Beaubien, Timm, Briggs, Muldoon, Gehrke, Fischrupp, and Phil Smith.

Boom times and hard times followed. During the year of 1891 there was no land to be bought under $2,000. A long depression soon followed and values again settled to a proper basis. In 1873 the price of an acre was $100 and by 1889 advanced to $1,000 and more.

The coming of the Standard Oil Company in 1889 enlarged Mr. Schrage's interests in many directions and he soon after retired from the store. Things really began to happen for Henry in 1895, the year Whiting was incorporated as a town. The sale of some of Schrage's land to the Standard Oil Company provided Henry with the money to start a bank, and thus began the Bank of Whiting on April 21, 1895 with total capital of $35,000.

As the city of Whiting grew, so did Henry's bank. In 1911 the Bank moved from 1738-119th Street to a new 2-story location at New York Avenue and 119th Street, where it remains today. The Bank was incorporated in 1917 with Henry as Chairman and his youngest son, Walter Sr., as President. Henry was dedicated to ensuring that the Bank remained strong. He was so committed that, during the depression years, he used his personal assets to replace Bank loans that had gone bad. Henry remained active at the Bank until within a few weeks of his death in 1932.

Like his father, Walter Schrage, Sr. was keenly interested in the progress of the Whiting community. He served in various civic positions, with his first public service being a school board member. In 1913 he was elected Mayor of Whiting, a position which he held for 16 years. Walter helped transform Whiting from a city of sandhills, wooden sidewalks and unpaved streets to a city that was modern in every respect. His most notable improvements were the filtration and sewage disposal plants, public playgrounds and the development of Whiting Park.

His son, Walter Jr., went to work in the Bank as a clerk in 1933. He became president in 1941 upon the death of his father, and continued the family ways of community involvement while operating the Bank according to principles instilled in him by his father and grandfather. In 1960 the name of the Bank was changed from the Bank of Whiting to the First Bank of Whiting. The Bank enjoyed substantial growth under his management with the addition of four branch offices in the surrounding communities.

Michael E. Schrage, the fourth generation of the Schrage family, joined the Bank in 1972, was named President in 1977 and succeeded his father as Chairman in 1982. As the Bank continued to grow under his direction, it became clear that it had outgrown its name. In 1991, the name was changed to Centier Bank to reflect its unique identity and the expansion throughout Lake and Porter counties.

One hundred years after Henry Schrage first dreamed of opening his own bank, Centier remains an independent, family-owned and family-managed financial institution. With 18 locations throughout Northwest Indiana, the Bank still focuses on helping families, small businesses and their communities, a tradition that Michael Schrage intends to carry on into Centier's next century of service.